

MARX AND MONTAGE

IT IS ALWAYS good to have a new Kluge, provided you know what lies in store for you. His latest film, *News from Ideological Antiquity*—some nine hours long—is divided into three parts: I. Marx and Eisenstein in the Same House; II. All Things are Bewitched People; III. Paradoxes of Exchange Society.¹ Rumour has it that Kluge has here filmed Eisenstein's 1927–28 project for a film version of Marx's *Capital*, whereas in fact only Kluge's first part deals with this tantalizing matter. The rumour has been spread by the same people who believe Eisenstein actually wrote a sketch for a film on *Capital*, whereas he only jotted down some twenty pages of notes over a half-year period.² And at least some of these people know that he was enthusiastic about Joyce's *Ulysses* during much the same time and 'planned' a film on it, a fact that distorts their fantasies about the *Capital* project as well. Yet if Eisenstein's notes for film projects all looked like this until some of them were turned into 'real'—that is to say, fiction or narrative—films, it is only fair to warn viewers that Kluge's 'real' films look more like Eisenstein's notes.

Many important intellectuals have—as it were, posthumously—endorsed Marxism: one thinks of Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* and of Deleuze's unrealized *Grandeur de Marx*, along with any number of more contemporary witnesses to the world crisis ('we are all socialists now', etc.). Is Kluge's new film a recommitment of that kind? Is he still a Marxist? Was he ever one? And what would 'being a Marxist' mean today? The Anglo-American reader may even wonder how the Germans in general now relate to their great national classic, with rumours of hundreds of *Capital* reading groups springing up under the auspices of the student wing of the Linkspartei. Kluge says this in the accompanying printed matter: 'The possibility of a European revolution seems to have vanished; and along with it the belief in a historical process that can be directly shaped by human

consciousness'.³ That Kluge believes in collective pedagogy, however, and in the reappropriation of negative learning processes by positive ones, in what one might call a reorientation of experience by way of a reconstruction of 'feelings' (a key or technical term for him): this is evident not only in his interpretive comments on his various films and stories, but also in such massive theoretical volumes as his *Geschichte und Eigensinn*—History and Obstinacy—written in collaboration with Oskar Negt.

All of these works bear on history; and of few countries can one say that they have lived so much varied history as Germany. Balzac's work would have been impossible without the extraordinary variety of historical experience encountered by the French, from revolution to world empire, from foreign occupation to economic reconstruction, and not excluding unspeakable suffering and failure along with war crimes and atrocities. Kluge's stories, or anecdotes, or *faits divers*—some thousands of pages of them—draw on a comparable mass of historical raw material.

But history is something you have to dig up and to dig in: like Kluge's heroine Gabi Teichert in *Die Patriotin*, who literally gets out her spade and frantically excavates, scrabbling for clues to the past in bones and potsherds. And not necessarily in vain: in another film, the knee of a German soldier's skeleton testifies and tells some 'useful' war stories. Indeed, *News from Ideological Antiquity* has its own share of zany or even idiotic moments—a pair of actors reading Marx's incomprehensible prose aloud and in unison to one another, a DDR instructor explaining 'liquidity' to a recalcitrant pupil, and even a kind of concluding satyr play in which the (rather tiresome) comedian Helge Schneider plays a variety of Marx-inspired roles, complete with wigs, false beards and other circus paraphernalia. For as Kluge tells us, 'we must let Till Eulenspiegel pass across Marx and Eisenstein both, in order to create a confusion allowing knowledge and emotions to be combined together in new ways'.⁴

Meanwhile, on a less jocular level, we confront a sometimes interminable series of talking heads—Enzensberger, Sloterdijk, Dietmar

¹ Alexander Kluge, *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike* (News from Ideological Antiquity), 3 DVDs, Frankfurt 2008.

² These are published as Eisenstein's 'Notes for a Film of *Capital*', translated by Maciej Sliwowski, Jay Leyda and Annette Michelson, in *October: The First Decade*, Cambridge, MA 1987, pp. 115–38; they first appeared in *October 2*, 1976; hereafter NFC.

³ Kluge, *Nachrichten*, p. 4.

⁴ Kluge, *Nachrichten*, p. 16.

Dath, Negt and other authorities—as they confront the typical Kluge interview, part prompting, part leading questions, part cross-examining his own witnesses. We glimpse a weird project of Werner Schroeter, in which Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* is acted out through the conflict on the bridge in *Battleship Potemkin* ('the rebirth of Tristan out of the spirit of Potemkin'); along with excerpts from operas by Luigi Nono and Max Brand, not to speak of the classics. We see a short by Tom Tykwer on the humanization of objects, sequences on the assassination of Rosa Luxemburg and, on a lighter note, an evening with Marx and Wilhelm Liebknecht. Many film clips and stills are interpolated, mostly from the silent period, and dramatic graphics from both Marxian and Eisensteinian texts make it clear that the intertitles of the silent period could be electrifying indeed, if resurrected in bold colour and dramatic typography. It is Kluge's own version of the Eisensteinian 'montage of attractions' (this filmmaker might say 'of feelings'). Viewers unaccustomed to his practices may well find this an unbelievable hodge-podge. But they too can eventually learn to navigate this prodigious site of excavation: not yet a full-fledged and professionally organized museum, this is an immense dig, with all kinds of people, amateur and specialist alike, milling around in various states of activity, some mopping their brows or eating a sandwich, others lying full-length on the ground in order to brush dirt from a jawbone, still others sorting various items into the appropriate boxes on tables sheltered by a tent, if not taking a nap or lecturing a novice, treading a narrow path so as not to step on the evidence. It is our first contact with ideological antiquity.

Eisenstein's version

Among the more recognizable fragments is, to be sure, that 'new work on a libretto by Karl Marx', the 'film treatise' which was supposedly Eisenstein's next project after *October*, the alleged film of *Capital*. As always, Eisenstein's notes are so many reflexions on his own practice, past and future; characteristically, they re-read his own work as a progression of forms, like progress in scientific experimentation. There is no point leaving this narcissism unacknowledged—it is the source of much of the pedagogical and didactic excitement and enthusiasm of his writings; but we do not necessarily have to accept his own assessments of his career, especially since they varied greatly throughout his life.

Here, for example, he will read his work in terms of abstraction: as the progressive conquest of abstraction from *Potemkin* through *October* to the current project. (We might have preferred him to characterize it as the enlargement of his filmic conquest of the concrete to include abstraction, but never mind.) Predictably, we move from the rising lions in *Potemkin* to that ‘treatise on deity’ which is the icons/idols sequence in *October*.⁵ These moments are then to be seen as essay-like vertical interruptions in a horizontal narrative; and this is precisely why the Eisenstein–Joyce discussion is irrelevant here.

Commentators—and not only Kluge himself—have fastened on the jotting, ‘a day in a man’s life’ as the evidence for believing Eisenstein to have imagined a plot sequence like that of Joyce’s *Bloomsday*.⁶ Later on, they note the addition of a second ‘plot line’, that of social reproduction and ‘the “house-wifely virtues” of a German worker’s wife’, along with the reminder: ‘throughout the entire picture the wife cooks soup for her returning husband’, the unspecified ‘man’ of the earlier sequence having logically enough become a worker. This alleged routine cross-cutting—to which one should probably add the day in the life of a capitalist or a merchant—is being ruminated at the very same historical moment when, as Annette Michelson points out, Dziga Vertov is filming *Man with a Movie Camera*.⁷

It is true: ‘Joyce may be helpful for my purpose’, notes Eisenstein. But what follows is utterly different from the ‘day in the life of’ formula. For Eisenstein adds: ‘from a bowl of soup to the British vessels sunk by England’.⁸ What has happened is that we have forgotten the presence, in *Ulysses*, of chapters stylistically quite different from the day’s routine format. But Eisenstein has not: ‘In Joyce’s *Ulysses* there is a remarkable chapter of this kind, written in the manner of a scholastic catechism. Questions are asked and answers given’.⁹ But what is he referring to when he says, ‘of this kind’?

It is clear that Kluge already knows the answer, for in his filmic discussion of the notes, the pot of soup has become a water kettle, boiling away and whistling: the image recurs at several moments in the exposition

⁵ NFC, p. 116.

⁶ NFC, p. 127.

⁷ NFC, p. 127, fn 19.

⁸ NFC, p. 127. This enigmatic reference is itself referenced in the longer quote from p. 129 given below.

⁹ NFC, p. 119.

(Eisenstein's notes projected in graphics on the intertitles), in such a way that this plain object is 'abstracted' into the very symbol of energy. It boils impatiently, vehemently it demands to be used, to be harnessed, it is either the whistling signal for work, for work stoppage, for strikes, or else the motor-power of a whole factory, a machine for future production . . . Meanwhile, this is the very essence of the language of silent film, by insistence and repetition to transform their objects into larger-than-life symbols; a procedure intimately related to the close-up. But this is also what Joyce does in the catechism chapter; and *Ulysses's* first great affirmation, the first thunderous 'yes', comes here and not in Molly's closing words: it is the primal force of water streaming from the reservoir into Dublin and eventually finding its way indomitably to Bloom's faucet.¹⁰ (In Eisenstein the equivalent would be the milk separator of *The General Line*.)

The German worker's wife

It is at this point that we glimpse what Eisenstein really has in mind here: something like a Marxian version of Freudian free association—the chain of hidden links that leads us from the surface of everyday life and experience to the very sources of production itself. As in Freud, this is a vertical plunge downward into the ontological abyss, what he called 'the navel of the dream'; it interrupts the banal horizontal narrative and stages an associative cluster charged with affect. It is worth quoting Eisenstein's full notation at this point:

Throughout the entire picture the wife cooks soup for her returning husband. NB Could be two themes intercut for association: the soup-cooking wife and the home-returning husband. Completely idiotic (all right in the first stages of a working hypothesis): in the third part (for instance), association moves from the pepper with which she seasons food. Pepper. Cayenne. Devil's Island. Dreyfus. French chauvinism. *Figaro* in Krupp's hands. War. Ships sunk in the port. (Obviously, not in such quantity!!) NB Good in its non-banality—transition: pepper–Dreyfus–*Figaro*. It would be good to cover the sunken English ships (according to Kushner, 103 DAYS ABROAD) with the lid of a saucepan. It could even be not pepper—but kerosene for a stove and transition into *oil*.¹¹

¹⁰ See 'Ulysses in History', in *The Modernist Papers*, London and New York 2007.

¹¹ NFC, p. 129. Of the soup-cooking, Eisenstein has noted: 'the "house-wifely virtues" of a German worker's wife constitute the greatest evil, the strongest obstacle to a revolutionary uprising. A German worker's wife will always have something warm for her husband, will never let him go *completely* hungry. And there is the root of her negative role which slows the pace of social development. In the plot, this could take the form of "hot slop", and the meaning of this on "a world scale": NFC, p. 128.

Eisenstein proposes to do here what Brecht tried for in the coffee debate on the subway in *Kuhle Wampe*: to trace the visible symptoms back to their absent (or untotalizable) causes. But the dramatist's attempt is hijacked by our inevitable attention to the characters arguing, whereas Eisenstein aims, however crudely ('completely idiotic', but just a first draft), to draw the whole dripping complex up into the light as a montage of images. (The more appropriate cross-references were always Benjamin's omission of commentary in the Arcades constellations, and even Pound's ideograms—both of them also projects of a kind of synchronic historical representation.) Eisenstein's inevitable theorization of what he calls 'discursive film' centres on 'de-anecdotalization' as the central process here, and then finds its analogy in 'the working theory of "overtones"¹² which he was to develop a year later in his essay, 'The Filmic Fourth Dimension', in which a formulation in terms of 'physiological stimuli' will seek to displace the widely accepted Russian Formalist doctrine of the renewal of perception, of aesthetics' *ostranenie*, 'making strange'. Here there would be not only a conflict between the temporality of film (montage) and the simultaneity of the causal links or associations, but also a tension between the affective and the cognitive. Thus he writes of *The General Line*:

This montage is built, not on particular dominants, but takes as its guide the total stimulation through all stimuli. That is the original montage complex within the shot, arising from the collision and combination of the individual stimuli inherent in it.¹³

The theory of 'overtones' tended not only to foreground the bodily nature of sheer feeling—the *physiological quality* of Debussy and Scriabin—but also, by way of technical musical terms like 'dominant' and the contrapuntal, along with 'visual' overtones and undertones, to stake out the complexity of this whole 'fourth dimension' itself, which has inspired so much contemporary activity in so-called affect theory. It seems probable that the old myth of the 'persistence of vision'—the previous image subsisting briefly on the retina as the new perception comes to overlay and then replace it, a conception which has its musical analogue in pedal points—suggests a possible synthesis between the temporal succession of cinema and the contents of the individual images. But

¹² NFC, pp. 116–7.

¹³ Eisenstein, 'The Filmic Fourth Dimension', in *Film Form*, New York 1949, p. 67.

it does not resolve the tension that the most highly developed models of affect entertain with the cognitive content of these complexes; or in other words the Marxian attention to the production, distribution and consumption at work behind the phenomenological surface of everyday life and experience—going behind the scenes, as Marx describes it in *Capital*. The old problem of didactic art is not solved here, unless we are to think that knowledge of capitalism is at one with rage (*Potemkin*) or that the construction of socialism is at one with a sublime joy, as in the transcendental vision of the milk separator in *The General Line*.

Kluge does not try to reproduce the pepper sequence; but he does do something with another Eisensteinian motif:

woman's stocking full of holes and a silk one in a newspaper advertisement. It starts with a jerky movement, to multiply into 50 pairs of legs—*Revue, Silk, Art. The fight for the centimetre of silk stocking. The aesthetes are for it. The Bishops and morality are against.*¹⁴

But Kluge's rather decorative rehearsal of this multi-dimensional social object—he might also have included Kracauer's Busby Berkeley-like 'mass ornament'—scarcely reaches the allegorical complexities Eisenstein himself ultimately glimpsed:

On this level, one could solve:
Ein Paar seidene Strumpfe—art.
Ein Paar seidene Strumpfe—morality.
Ein Paar seidene Strumpfe—commerce and competition.
Ein Paar seidene Strumpfe—Indian women forced to incubate the silk cocoon by carrying them in *their armpits!*¹⁵

This final detail leads us back to the anecdotal level, which was supposed to have been neutralized in the new 'discursive' film language: yet it is surely what gives its piquancy to this vertical montage, just as *Devil's Island* and *Dreyfus* lend the pepper sequence its bite. And in fact, the notes are already full of anecdotal detail, of 'believe-it-or-not' *faits divers* that lead us to the very heart of capital. I like this one: 'Somewhere in the West. A factory where it is possible to pinch parts and tools. No search of workers made. Instead, the exit gate is a *magnetic* check point.'¹⁶ Chaplin

¹⁴ NFC, p. 129

¹⁵ NFC, p. 137.

¹⁶ NFC, p. 121.

would have liked the spectacle of nuts and bolts, hammers and wrenches, flying out of the workers' pockets.

Antiquities

Elective affinities: Kluge's own work is very much anecdotal in this sense, the narrative double-take, the unexpected punctum at the heart of what looked at first like a banal occurrence, a taste for the incongruity that is abstracted into his dealings with the great ideas. Deleuze's magnificent formula—'a clean-shaven Marx, a bearded Hegel'—would not be alien to him, as he tirelessly suggests new recordings of the stereotypical heritage on his own terms: the future reconstruction of experience, binding affects and knowledge together in new ways.

It is a future which demands the constitution of an antiquity appropriate to it. Yet is this 'ideological antiquity' not simply another way of saying that Marx, and with him Marxism, is outmoded? The comic sequences of Kluge's film, the young couple at various moments in history tormenting each other with a koranic recital of Marx's abstractions, might lead us to think so. Nor is Eisenstein non-outmoded either, with his baggage of old-fashioned melodrama, old-fashioned silent film, old-fashioned montage. Lenin and intertitles! Itself a seemingly dreary prospect for a digital postmodernity . . .

Yet one dimly remembers Marx's own feelings for antiquity: Prometheus and Aristotle's theory of value, Epicurus and Hegel's thoughts on Homer. And then there is the question with which the great 1857 draft introduction to the *Grundrisse* breaks off: 'the difficulty lies not in understanding that Greek art and epic poetry are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still give us aesthetic pleasure and are in certain respects regarded as a standard and unattainable model.'¹⁷ Marx was anything but nostalgic, and he understood that the polis was a limited and thereby contradictory social formation to which one could scarcely return; and also that any future socialism would be far more complex than capitalism itself, as Raymond Williams once observed.

For the concept of antiquity may have the function of placing us in some new relationship with the Marxian tradition and with Marx himself—as

¹⁷ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 28, New York 1986, p. 47.

well as Eisenstein. Marx is neither actual nor outmoded: he is classical, and the whole Marxist and Communist tradition, more or less equal in duration to Athens's golden age, is precisely that golden age of the European left, to be returned to again and again with the most bewildering and fanatical, productive and contradictory results.¹⁸ And if it is objected that it would be an abomination to glamorize an era that included Stalinist executions and the starvation of millions of peasants, a reminder of the bloodiness of Greek history might also be in order—the eternal shame of Megara, let alone the no less abominable miseries of slave society as such. Greece was Sparta as much as Athens, Sicily as much as Marathon; and the Soviet Union was also the deathknell of Nazism and the first sputnik, the People's Republic of China the awakening of countless millions of new historical subjects. The category of classical antiquity may not be the least productive framework in which a global left reinvents an energizing past for itself.

¹⁸ Something like this is what Peter Weiss's *Aesthetics of Resistance* can be said to be attempting.